

## Noticing Space

Ajahn Sumedho, *Tricycle*, Fall 1995



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In meditation, we can be alert and attentive; it's like listening. What we are doing is just bringing into awareness the way it is, noticing space and form. For example, we can notice space in a room. Most people probably wouldn't notice the space; they would notice the things in it—the people, the walls, the floor, the furniture. But in order to notice the space, what do we do? We withdraw our attention from the things and bring our attention to the space. This does not mean getting rid of things, or denying the things their right to be there. It merely means not concentrating on them, not going from one thing to another.

The space in a room is peaceful. The objects in the room can excite, repel, or attract, but the space has no such quality. However, even though the space does not attract our attention, we can be fully aware of it, and we become aware of it when we are no longer absorbed by the objects in the room. When we reflect on the space in the room, we feel a sense of calm because all space is the same; the space around you and the space around me is no different. It is not mine. I can't say "This space belongs to me" or "That space belongs to you."

Space is always present. It makes it possible for us to be together, contained within a room, in a space that is limited by walls. Space is also outside the room; it contains the whole building, the whole world. So space is not bound by objects in any way; it is not bound by anything. If we wish, we can view space as limited in a room, but really, space is unlimited.

Noticing the space around people and things provides a different way of looking at them, and developing this spacious view is a way of opening oneself. When one has a spacious mind, there is room for everything. When one has a narrow mind, there is room for only a few things. Everything has to be manipulated and controlled; the rest is just to be pushed out.

Life with a narrow view is suppressed and constricted; it is a struggle. There is always tension involved in it, because it takes an enormous amount of energy to keep everything in order all the time. If you have a narrow view of life, the disorder of life has to be ordered for you, so you are always busy manipulating the mind and rejecting things or holding on to them. This is the *dukkha* of ignorance, which comes from not understanding the way it is.

The spacious mind has room for everything. It is like the space in a room, which is never harmed by what goes in and out of it. In fact, we say “the space in this room,” but actually, the room is in the space, the whole building is in the space. When the building has gone, the space will still be there. The space surrounds the building, and right now we are containing space in a room. With this view we can develop a new perspective. We can see that there are walls creating the shape of the room, and there is the space. Looking at it one way, the walls limit the space in the room. But looking at it another way, we see that space is limitless.

We can apply this perspective to the mind, using the “I” consciousness to see space as an object. In the mind, we can see that there are thoughts and emotions—the mental conditions that arise and cease. Usually, we are dazzled, repelled, or bound by these thoughts and emotions. We go from one thing to another, reacting, controlling, manipulating, or trying to get rid of them. So we never have any perspective in our lives. We become obsessed with either repressing or indulging in these mental conditions; we are caught in these two extremes.

With meditation, we have the opportunity to contemplate the mind. The silence of the mind is like the space in a room. Take the simple sentence “I am” and begin to notice, contemplate, and reflect on the space around those two words. Rather than looking for something else, sustain attention on the space around the words. Look at thinking itself, really examine and investigate it. Now, you can’t watch yourself habitually thinking, because as soon as you notice that you’re thinking, the thinking stops. You might be going along worrying, “I wonder if this will happen. What if that happens? Oh, I’m thinking,” and it stops.

To examine the thinking process, deliberately think something: take just one ordinary thought, such as “I am a human being,” and just look at it. If you look at the beginning of it, you can see that just before you say “I,” there is a kind of empty space. Then, if you think in your mind, “I—am—a—human—being,” you will see space between the words. We are not looking at thought to see whether we have intelligent thoughts or stupid ones. Instead, we are deliberately thinking in order to notice the space around each thought. This way, we begin to have a perspective on the impermanent nature of thinking.

That is just one way of investigating so that we can notice the emptiness when there is no thought in the mind. Try to focus on that space; see if you can concentrate on that space before and after a thought. For how long can you do it? Think, “I am a human being,” and just before you start thinking it, stay in that space just before you say it. Now that’s mindfulness, isn’t it? Your mind is empty, but there is also an intention to think a particular thought. Then think it, and at the end of the thought, try to stay in the space at the end. Does your mind stay empty?

Most of our suffering comes from habitual thinking. If we try to stop it out of aversion to thinking, we can’t; we just go on and on and on. So the important thing is not to get rid of thought, but to understand it. And we do this by concentrating on the space in the mind, rather than on the thought.

Our minds tend to get caught up with thoughts of attraction or aversion to objects, but the space around those thoughts is not attractive or repulsive. The space around an attractive thought and a repulsive thought is not different, is it? Concentrating on the space between thoughts, we become less caught up in our preferences concerning the thoughts. So if you find that an obsessive thought of guilt, self-pity, or passion keeps coming up, then work with it in this way—deliberately think it, really bring it up as a conscious state, and notice the space around it.

It's like looking at the space in a room: you don't go looking for the space, do you? You are simply open to it, because it is here all the time. It is not anything you are going to find in the cupboard or in the next room, or under the floor—it is here right now. So you open to its presence; you begin to notice that it is here.

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*Image: Les Valeurs Personnelles, Rene Magritte, 1951-2, oil on canvas. Courtesy private collection, Lake Mohegan, NY*